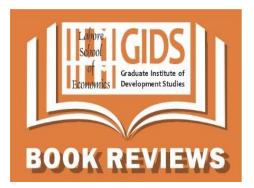Zahra Mughis

THE DIGITAL DISCONNECT: THE SOCIAL CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF DIGITAL INEQUALITIES

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Who is online and why? What does it really mean to be online? Do the digital spaces mirror the offline social structures? Are some digital voices *more equal* than the others? More critically, is the digital access debate still important when embedded technologies, artificial intelligence, blockchain, etc. are *virtually* redefining notions of connectivity and engagement? Your favourite chatbot would say yes as does Ellen Helsper's *The Digital Disconnect*, a comprehensive book based on years of research.

Dr. Ellen Helsper is Professor of Digital Inequalities at the London School of Economics. Her book, The Digital Disconnect, maps digital access on individuals' lived experiences to illustrate how and why *digital inequalities* are inherently social and societal and vice versa. It summarizes what we know about these inequalities and highlights what we should find out and why. It begins with a critical review of the existing digital access and gaps research. Backed by qualitative and quantitative evidence on everyday engagement differentials among individuals, it then peels off the layers of access in different dimensions of engagement. It brings into focus the often-overlooked role of communities, both offline and online, in shaping who goes online, who stays online, and who does what online. In doing so, it critiques the one-size-fits-all policies and cause-and-effect perspectives on digital access.

The essence of the book is well-reflected in the definition of digital inequalities it follows. Based on her lifelong work, Helsper introduces digital inequalities as the "systematic differences between individuals from different backgrounds in the opportunities and abilities to translate digital engagement into benefits and avoid the harms." This conceptualization itself

challenges the commonly used binaries of *haves and have-nots* or *connected and disconnected* and strictly *economic* considerations of the same. It links the social and digital resources and processes of access. Therefore, it helps contest the digital access narrative that equates *opportunities* with *outcomes.*

Helsper has organized her exploration of the intertwined socio-digital inequalities in a logical structure by dividing the book intro three parts. The Digital Disconnect, in its first section, makes its case for a *meso-level* and *intersectional* approach to digital inequalities by grounding its argument in the traditional inequalities' scholarship. It uses the *Corresponding Fields* model, developed by the author in 2012, to establish the horizontal and vertical interplays between economic, social, cultural, and personal capital and digital access.

Subsequently, the book illustrates how these linkages play out in the well-researched domains of infrastructure and physical access, digital skills, and civic engagement. It explains how the pre-conceived notions of what technology can or can't do for individuals determines who chooses to go online. It goes on to show why the overemphasis on economics of digital skills to meet labour market demands could be harmful. It then highlights how marginalized communities may not enjoy full civic participation in the digital spaces, either. The second section of the book, thus, accentuates the contextual nature of digital access whereby opportunities do not equate with outcomes.

The last section of the book brings the reader's attention to the under-studied socio-emotional dynamics of digital inequalities. It examines experiences as digital engagement transcends the professional or formal spheres to the more personal and informal aspects of human life. It illustrates how the digital spaces may not be safe for everyone and how some voices may be stronger than others in creation and promotion of sociocultural narratives. Helsper closes her discussion on digital inequalities by inviting researchers to address the data gaps, particularly in the Global South. Moreover, she identifies avenues for exploring the psychological and networked aspects of digital access. Lastly, she emphasizes the need for addressing digital inequalities as a concern of social policy.

Throughout the book, Helsper elaborates on the feedback loops between social and digital inequalities. She puts the spotlight on lived realities and the human element in the processes that shape digital access, engagement, and participation. This emphasizes the role of factors shaping human interactions and experiences – social networks and communities. This proves

crucial in understanding that individual agency is not the sole predictor of people's digital experiences, that the digital realities and identities do not develop in silos. Thus, the reader is made more aware of their role in shaping the digital experiences of others. In her concluding remarks too, she entrusts her hopes of a just digital future to all of us – policymakers, practitioners, researchers, and participants of the digital spaces.

On the question of relevance, the reviewer finds this book resourceful and convincing. It underscores the significance of digital inequalities as the world stands at the brink of pivotal technological, economic, and societal shifts. It does so by illustrating that inequalities compound, from lack of access and skills to lack of engagement and participation, and feed on the intersections of socio-cultural (dis)advantages. Most notably, it argues that skills-centric interventions should not be narrowly focussed on market needs and filling the gaps. Instead, it posits that digital literacy should be adaptable to the evolving dynamics of meaningful digital engagement. It emphasizes the need for creating awareness when digitalization of human interactions is becoming increasingly invisible.

Overall, it is an academic text meant for all those interested in the human realities of the digital. It benefits from rigorous and evidence-based research. Yet, it is accessible because of its logical structure. Also, it provides concise but concrete and simplified explanation of all topics included. The Digital Disconnect offers valuable insights on what it means to be online. It is worth a read because digital inequalities are as relevant today as they were at the turn of the century.